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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7423
INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JERUSALEM 000178

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/28/2020
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [KPAL](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: ISRAELI ANTI-SETTLEMENT ACTIVISTS SWELL SHEIKH
JARRAH PROTESTS

REF: A. 08 JERUSALEM 2011
[1](#)B. 09 JERUSALEM 1344

Classified By: Consul General Daniel Rubinstein
for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (SBU) Protests by anti-settlement activists in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah on January 15 and 22 drew an unusually large turnout and resulted in a total of 35 arrests. The demonstrations were attended by a mostly-Israeli crowd of veteran peace activists, undergraduates, and retired Members of Knesset, garnering significant media attention, particularly after activists complained of over-aggressive police tactics. Sheikh Jarrah's Arab residents and local Palestinian activists remained on the sidelines, but expressed appreciation for what some speculated might be a resurgence, however modest, of "pro-peace" Israeli sentiment in Jerusalem. End Summary.

JANUARY 15 AND 22 SHEIKH JARRAH PROTESTS DRAW HUNDREDS

[1](#)2. (SBU) On January 15 and 22 (successive Fridays), increasingly large crowds of Israeli demonstrators gathered in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah to protest the court-ordered expulsion of Arab families from their homes on the basis of Ottoman-era land claims presented by pro-settlement Israeli organizations (see paras 8-10 for background). A gathering of 100-150 protesters on January 15 resulted in the arrest of 15, including Hagai Elad, head of the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI), after the demonstration was deemed illegal by Israeli police. The Jerusalem Magistrates' Court afterwards dropped all charges against those detained.

COURT VACATES SECOND ROUND OF ARRESTS

[1](#)3. (SBU) On January 22, a crowd of 400-500 protesters assembled in Sheikh Jarrah and skirmished with local pro-settlement activists, who reportedly threw rocks at demonstrators and local Arab residents. Twenty protesters were arrested for causing a disturbance; all were freed by the Magistrates' Court, which ruled on January 28 that Israeli law does not require a permit for the holding of protest vigils which do not involve political speeches or disturbances to public order. Hagit Ofran of anti-settlement NGO Peace Now predicted that demonstrations planned for January 29 would draw at least 200-300.

PROTESTERS A MIX OF ISRAELI PEACE VETERANS, NEW FACES

¶4. (SBU) The crowds gathered on January 15 and 22 were primarily Israeli, and represented a mixture of old guard pro-peace activists, largely dormant since the mid-1990s, and students bused in by NGOs from Tel Aviv and Jerusalem universities. One protester described the demographic as "professors from Hebrew University and Jerusalem teenagers." Several senior Israeli political figures joined their ranks on January 22, including former Meretz party leader Yossi Sarid, former Speaker of the Knesset Avraham Burg, and Israeli Arab Member of Knesset Mohammed Barakeh. Jerusalem police contacts said that the demonstration planned for January 29 demonstration could also attract anti-settlement Arab demonstrators as well as pro-settlement Israeli counter-demonstrators. They noted that either development could lead to a significant escalation and potential violence.

ARAB RESIDENTS REMAIN ON THE SIDELINES

¶5. (SBU) Some Arab youth from the neighborhood joined the crowds beating drums and waving banners (including the Palestinian flag). Most of Sheikh Jarrah's Arab residents -- including members of the al-Kurd, Ghawi, and Hanoun families, expelled from their homes by court order -- watched from the sidelines. Note: Since their November 2008 (Ref A) and August 2009 (Ref B) evictions, members of the al-Kurd, Ghawi, and Hanoun families maintained a series of protest tents in the streets in front of their houses, which are now occupied by Israeli pro-settlement activists. These demonstrations attracted comparatively little attention. End note.

FOCUS SHIFTS FROM ARAB RIGHTS TO ARREST TACTICS

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¶6. (C) ACRI and Peace Now activists noted that following the January 15 arrests, the focus of Sheikh Jarrah protests shifted to some extent, from the humanitarian situation of the Arab families displaced to civil liberties issues, and what both organizations termed heavy-handed police tactics against non-violent protesters. Ofraan noted that the demonstrators' profile had increased the appeal of the story to the Israeli press, saying, "these protesters are good citizens -- Members of the Knesset, kids of parents who are professors and academics with media connections. Their parents saw what happened to their children, saw the police using pepper gas, and called all of their friends in the media."

ARAB ACTIVIST: PROTESTS A "SOURCE OF HOPE"

¶7. (C) Palestinian activists noted that the absence of Arab demonstrators was unsurprising, given the gulf between even pro-peace Israelis and Arab groups, and the traditionally quietist, disorganized nature of East Jerusalem Palestinian political activity. Former Palestinian Authority (PA) Minister for Jerusalem Affairs Hatem Abdel Qader said, however, that the protests were a "source of hope and inspiration for the Palestinians." Abdel Qader told Post, "the Israeli peace camp has been paralyzed, practically, for more than ten years, since the beginning of the Second Intifada." Palestinian violence in those years had, he said, alienated natural allies on the Israeli side. "Let's hope," Abdel Qader said, "that these protests open a new debate in Israeli society about supporting the Palestinian struggle."

BACKGROUND

¶8. (U) In the nineteenth century, the neighborhood now known as Sheikh Jarrah comprised two Jewish-majority villages -- Shimon HaTzadik (named after Simon the Just, whose tomb is located there) and Nahalat Shimon -- and a number of residential estates and olive groves belonging to Jerusalem's

Arab elite. After 1948, much of the property in the area was expropriated by the Jordanian government under the terms of the Jordanian Enemy Property Law. In 1956, the Jordanian Custodian of Enemy Property leased a portion of the expropriated property to the Jordanian Ministry of Development, which worked with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) to re-settle there 28 Arab refugee families displaced from their homes across the Green Line Israel by the 1948 war.

¶9. (U) According to the NGO Ir Amim, under the terms of the joint Jordanian-UNRWA project, the re-settled families were supposed to receive the deeds to these homes after three years of paying a nominal rent. The property titles were never formally transferred. Starting in 1972, two Israeli organizations -- the Sephardic Israel Committee and the Knesset Israel Committee -- brought a series of legal suits against the 27 re-settled Arab families remaining in Sheikh Jarrah, claiming ownership of the land on which the UNRWA-built homes were located, in the name of the original, pre-1948 Jewish landowners.

¶10. (U) In 1972, these 27 families were ordered to pay rent to the Sephardic Israel Committee and the Knesset Israel Committee. Twenty-three refused, and, in 1982, the two committees sued them for delinquency. A series of legal actions and home invasions by pro-settlement groups followed.

In November 2008, the al-Kurds were the first of the families to be evicted. The Ghawi and al-Hanoun families were evicted in August 2009 (Ref B). Legal actions against the remaining families continue, joined by a third Israeli pro-settlement group, Nahalat Shimon International.

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